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ON THE WEB

Ky. wine to raise money for horse rescue

Chrisman Mill label features sketch by actor Jack Nicholson

By Mary Meehan

HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER

Just how did a miniature horse, Hollywood heavyweight Jack Nicholson, a Jessamine County vineyard and a Scott County equine charity all become part of the same tale?

It seems Michael Blowen, founder of the Old Friends horse rescue, and bushy-browed actor Nicholson really are old friends.

One phone call is all it took to get Nicholson's permission to use his pencil sketch of Old Friends' unofficial mascot, a shaggy-maned miniature horse named Silver Charm, on a limited-edition wine label.

Sales of the wine, a Kentucky chambourcin produced by Jessamine County's Chrisman Mill winery, will benefit Old Friends. One thousand labeled bottles will be produced and will begin selling Thursday for \$21.99 at Liquor Barn stores and Bacchus Fine Wine-Spirits in Midway.

The "Artist Signature Series" labels -- with a new design released quarterly -- could raise up to \$32,000 a year for Old Friends, said Chrisman Mill co-owner Denise Nelson. The actor, who rarely endorses products, was flattered that his artwork could help the non-profit, which cares for retired thoroughbreds and rescues well-known former racers from slaughter, Blowen said.

Blowen, a former Boston Globe movie critic who met Nicholson during a 1985 junket for the film *Prizzi's Honor*, said they've long bonded over a love of horse racing.

As Blowen tells it, Nicholson's first job was "answering Tom & Jerry's mail" at the MGM studio's animation department. Nicholson's other main duty? Taking the cartoonists' bets to California's Santa Anita Race Track. Nicholson became hooked and, over the years, the three-time Oscar winner and Blowen have watched many races together.

Blowen's own love of racing found him mucking stalls for free during his last few years as a journalist. After taking a buyout from the Globe in 1999, he and his wife, Diane White, moved to Kentucky, first basing Old Friends on a Midway farm. Last summer, the operation moved to 52 acres outside Georgetown.

Nicholson's sketch of Silver Charm was an unexpected gift that came in the mail about six weeks after Blowen had sent the actor photographs of his farm and animals. Nicholson's original sketch is framed in the Blowen home.

Having the sketch on a home-grown Kentucky product is "a great win-win situation. It's putting Kentucky grapes and Kentucky farmers out front," said Nelson, whose company

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creates the labels and cuts its wholesale profits to raise money for the charity. "It's such a great feeling to be able to get money for this organization."

(Chrisman Mill is working with the Woodford Humane Society on a similar campaign called The Whine Club. For information go to www.woodfordhumanesociety.org.)

Blowen is hoping to mine his other Hollywood ties for original artwork from actor-director Albert Brooks and television legend Angie Dickinson. Penny Chenery, owner of Triple Crown winner Secretariat, has agreed to create the series' second label. Blowen said the project seems to be bursting out of the gate: "I've got the king of Hollywood and the queen of racing!"

Blowen is trying to convince Nicholson, who last came to the Kentucky Derby in 1998, to fly in for this year's Run for the Roses. But if Nicholson makes the trip, it will likely be on the spur of the moment.

"He never plans anything," said Blowen with a grin. "He'll just show up."

www.chrismanmill.com/

www.oldfriendsequine.org/

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